

Ford Motor Company Building
451-455 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C.

HABS No. DC-375

HABS,
DC,
WASH,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. DC-375

FORD MOTOR COMPANY BUILDING

Location: 451-455 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Square 491, lots 28,29, corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and John Marshall Place, Washington, D.C.

Present Owner: The Canadian Government

Present Occupant
and Use: Demolished 1979

Significance: The Ford Motor Company Building is an early example of reinforced concrete construction in Washington. It was designed by Albert Kahn Associates of Detroit, Michigan, one of the country's foremost architectural firms during the early 1900s. In this building, Kahn combines industrial with Neoclassical detailing. This building signifies the grand scale development that began to transform Pennsylvania Avenue in the late Nineteenth Century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1915-1916 (permit #1039, 9/1/15)
2. Architect: Albert Kahn and Associates, Detroit, Michigan. Albert Kahn's architectural practice spanned a period of fifty-four years beginning in 1896 until his death in 1942. Kahn is best known for his pioneer work designing large scale automobile manufacturing complexes.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Ford Building was owned by the Ford Motor Company from 1915 until its sale to the District of Columbia in 1931. Subsequent purchase of various lots in Square 491 by the Canadian Government in 1979 also included the Ford Building.
4. Original plans and construction: The Ford Building appears as originally designed. See photocopies of original drawings in HABS collection.
5. Alterations and additions: Alterations are limited to interior arrangements to accommodate later tenants. A kitchen/cafeteria was incorporated on the main floor in the south-west stockroom and the west wall of the showroom was removed.

B. Sources of Information:

1. Original architectural drawings: Kahn Associates, Detroit, Michigan. Photocopies of floor plans, elevations, and sections.
2. Old views: Ford Motor Company Archives Collection. Selected xeroxed photographs of interiors as well as exteriors and 1919 photograph of building. Industrial Archivist, 26305 Glendale Avenue, Redford, Michigan 48239
3. Bibliography:

a. Sources:

Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Martin Luther King Library, Washington, D.C.

District of Columbia Deed Books, Recorder of Deeds, Washington, D.C.

Lusk's District of Columbia Phone Directories, Martin Luther King Library, Washington, D.C.

District of Columbia General Assessment Records, Martin Luther King Library, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Baist's Real Estate Atlas, Martin Luther King Library, Washington, D.C.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character:

The Ford Building is an early example of reinforced concrete construction in Washington. The Pennsylvania Avenue and John Marshall Place facades strive for monumentality with Neoclassical elements predominating over the modern industrial characteristics such as the solid-void proportions and the utilitarian window sashes.

B. Description of exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions:

The lot is located on the southeast corner of Square 491. It has an irregular, diamond shape, measuring 140' along Pennsylvania Avenue, 166' along John Marshall Place, and is chamfered on its southeast corner. The six-story

reinforced concrete structure covers the entire lot. The Pennsylvania Avenue facade has five bays and the John Marshall place has six bays.

2. Foundations: Concrete footings
3. Wall construction, finish and color:

The south and east facades are limestone-clad and are supported by a base course of granite pier blocks. Structural piers divide each facade into five bays which enclose three windows each.

The first floor has a single square opening at each bay. This floor is defined by a continuous belt course at ceiling level decorated with a labyrinth-fret relief. From this belt course piers rise through the fifth floor. At the second floor the tripartite window bays are separated by simple stone mullions which support a bay-wide decorative spandrel. From the third to the sixth floors continuous metal mullions with foliage motifs divide the window bays. The original marble spandrel panels below each fourth and fifth floor window have been removed from their ornamented metal frames.

The sixth floor is separated by string courses above and below. The structural piers at this level feature large relief plaques decorated with classical motifs. Above the sixth floor is a dentiled cornice with an ogee molding. A plain stone parapet caps the building.

The north and west elevations are more representative of early Twentieth Century industrial construction. Walls are clad in beige brick. The west elevation responds to its visibility from the Avenue with ornamental coursing at its top floor and on the southernmost bay. The north elevation presents no ornamentation, little fenestration and is dominated by a projecting elevator tower in red brick.

4. Structural system and framing:

This building constitutes one of the earliest examples of reinforced concrete construction in Washington. [Verified by conversation with Fritz Gutheim, Registered Architect and Professor of Architectural History at George Washington University, Washington, D.C.] Vertical supports are mushroom-shaped columns consisting of a shaft, octagonal in section, and a flared octagonal capital supporting an octagonal drop panel. Concrete spandrel beams on the periphery provide structural bracing. The same dropped and/or raised beams occur between the columns that define the elevator shaft.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: There is a projecting entrance of metal and glass on the Pennsylvania Avenue elevation. The corner posts are paneled and contain a design in relief consisting of a classical urn with a floral design ascending to a composite capital. The entablature has a single-fascia architrave with a cable molding at the top. At the ends of the frieze, there are small plaques with urn design, and at the center, separated by vertical fluting, another plaque occurs with the Ford Motor Company logo. The entrance terminates in a rounded pediment with another acanthus mold, surmounted by a bead-and-reel molding on the archivolt. The tympanum contains an oval shield with a central winged triangle and a single fleuron above and below. It is held by affronted seated chimerae.
- b. Windows: Large metal framed paned windows fill the bays on both the south and east facades of the Ford Building with metal spandrels between the third, fourth, and fifth floor windows. Second and sixth story windows are divided into three per bay (as above).

6. Roof:

The roof is accessible through the northwest stairtower. The parapet rises approximately 6' above roof level. The cornice also functions as a gutter. At the center of the building stands the elevator shaft, whose two-story tower, clad in beige brick, stands as an isolated roof pavilion. This tower relates to the rest of the building with its Neoclassical elements, but in a smaller scale.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: The basement of the Ford Building covers only the northwest section of the site, with the elevator pits forming the southeast corner. Clockwise from the elevators are a machine room, coal, ash, and boiler room.
- b. First floor: This floor functioned as the automobile showroom. The showroom plan is parallel to Pennsylvania Avenue. It is three structural bays wide and two deep. The ceiling height is 17'-0". The floor plan consists of a strong symmetrical design generated by the south entrance opening to face a majestic open staircase at the north end. East of the staircase is the women's retiring room and restroom. To the west of the showroom is a small terrace with access to the stockroom and to the garage which fills the remainder of the floor. Between the second and third bays from the west in the garage

are the freight elevators. An inclined ramp is located at the northeast corner of the building where automobiles entered for service.

- c. Upper floors: The second through the sixth floors are typical and consist of a completely open space, interrupted only in the structural grid by mushroom capped columns. Tool cribs and rest rooms lie along the east wall. Staircases are located in the southwest corner and the projecting shaft on the northwest corner.

2. Stairways:

The grand staircase in the showroom uses twin quarter turns at the landing to the second floor. The steps are in marble. An ornate wrought metal balustrade supports a wood rail.

- 3. Flooring: The original flooring in the showroom was flint tile. This was later covered with carpet and linoleum. Garage spaces have concrete floors.

4. Wall and ceiling finish:

- a. Showroom: Columns and walls of the showroom are further embellished with fluting on their corners. The 9'-0" high wall paneling is topped by a dentiled entablature. The ceiling features a dropped beam design with an octagonal coffering design on the underside. The ceiling areas are in turn enhanced by a perimeter fret that repeats the design of the facade's first floor cornice.
- b. Other floors: Walls and ceilings of the garage spaces are exposed concrete.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The projecting entrance on the south facade is duplicated on the interior, but in wood with a simplified design. The corner pilasters are simply paneled and carry Tuscan capitals. The door frame has a leaf molding running parallel to a bead-and-reel molding. The tympanum contains a central circular panel.

6. Decorative features and trim:

Flanking the grand staircase in the showroom are secret doors in the paneling enclosing closets and a telephone. A wood paneled information desk and telephone switchboard are located in front of the east closet. Both the entrances to the women's retiring rooms and the men's restroom are secret doors between pilasters. Multi-paned, double glazed windows with leaded glass are located above the paneling of the

women's retiring room and along the east wall of the showroom.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation:

The Ford Building is located on the southeast corner of Square 491, at the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue and John Marshall Place. The site is bounded on the north by a surface parking lot. To the west stands the former D.C. Central Library.

2. Original setting:

Square 491 was originally divided into twenty-four narrow lots. This layout was maintained until around 1887 when six lots on the western end of the Square became the site for the National Hotel. On the northeast corner of the Square, two lots were integrated to accommodate the Metropolitan Methodist Episcopalian Church.

In 1903, the Reuters Hotel moved into the existing structure on the site where the Ford Building was to be built later. A massive shift along the Square's north side began also from a basically residential area to a commercial one, in the form of two large baking establishments. In 1917, the Reuters Hotel and several adjacent structures were demolished to make way for the six-story structure of the Ford Motor Company Building. Together with the National Hotel (known earlier as the Metropolitan and the site of the famous Indian Queen Hotel), at the other end of the block, the Ford Building established the predominance of a new, considerably larger scale for the Pennsylvania Avenue facade line. Demolition without subsequent construction began in 1939. By 1959, most of Square 491 was barren. Only the Ford Building and the D.C. Library (1941) remained on Pennsylvania Avenue and on C Street. Only two 1850s rowhouses stood isolated. The D.C. Employment Security Building was erected in the early 1960s on the site of the National Hotel. The sites of the Ford Building and the two 1850s townhouses will be used for the new Chancery of the Canadian Embassy.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation to mitigate the adverse affect of the completion of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Plan, in compliance with Executive Order 11593, and Stipulation 6 of a Memorandum of Agreement with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. John Burns, AIA, was the HABS project coordinator. The records were completed under the general supervision of Jeffrey S. Wolf, Architect with PADC. Historic data was compiled by PADC consultants in historic

preservation, Anderson, Notter/Mariani of Washington, D.C.
Documentary photographs were made by Jeffrey Wolf. The data
was expanded by Wendy Hunter, Architect with PADC.

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Historic American Buildings Survey
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